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## REMAINS OF THE FUTURE: Rethinking the Space and Time of Ruination through the Volta Resettlement Project, Ghana

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Walking around the township of New Senchi, Ghana, the ghost of the original plan is still faintly discernible in linear rows of crumbling, single-story houses.<sup>1</sup> Constructed to resettle people displaced by a large hydroelectric power scheme in the 1960s, the town was at the vanguard of postindependence visions of national development and embodied the high-modern aspirations of the time (see J. Scott 1998). Original plans show the spatial zoning of industrial and residential use. Architects' drawings depict rows of bungalows fronted by manicured lawns and fringed by neatly clipped hedges. Artists' impressions of interiors show flushing toilets and modern kitchens. I am accompanied by Eric, an unemployed primary-school teacher in his early thirties. Although born after the 1960s, he has a vivid sense of the project's promised futures and describes these as we walk: officials told resettlers that well-paid jobs would be created through the industries that would develop, catalyzed by the cheap and plentiful power supplied by the nearby Akosombo dam; subsistence farming would be transformed through mechanization and industrialization; infrastructure—including railways, paved roads, and a nearby airport—would be built.

Eric points out a house in a particularly poor state of repair. In the absence of proper drainage, surface runoff has undercut the walls, which are sagging

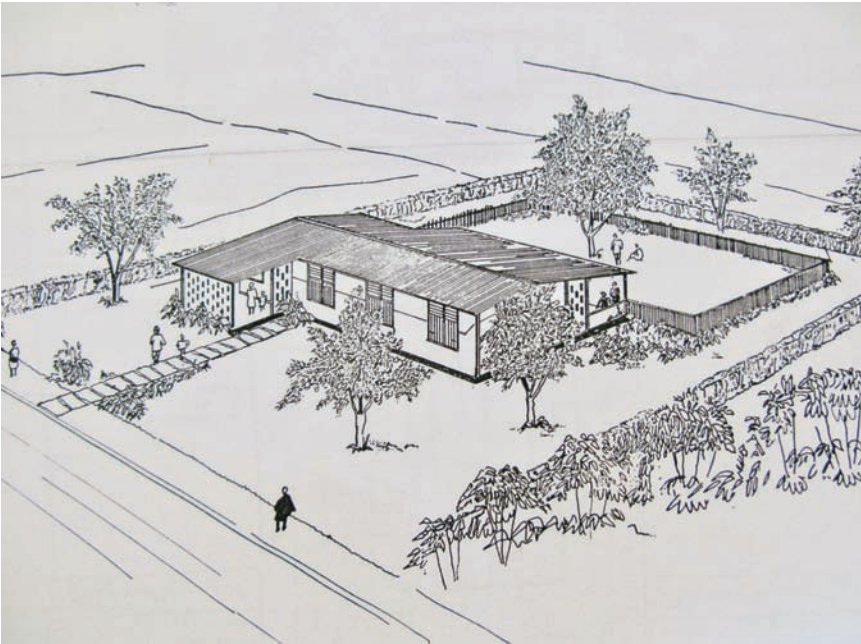


Figure 1. Artist's impression of a resettlement core house, circa 1965. Reproduced from *The Volta River Experience*, edited by Robert Chambers. The image instantiates an aesthetic of modernity, with a visual appeal to order and unification through the use of rectilinear forms, beyond the specific content of the project's promises.

heavily. A temporary lean-to structure, built from mud and crudely thatched, has been added to the side, as a makeshift pen for animals. The tin roof, explicitly hailed by midcentury planners as the epitome of modern efficiency and hygiene, is rusting. To the front and rear of the single-room nucleus there are roofed but open areas originally envisaged as spaces for further rooms. Built in anticipation of future development, these empty spaces now embody and elicit a broader sense of absence: "There is no development here, we are living like animals," Eric pronounces with frustration and despair. His thoughts make evident the specific experience of ruination that emerges in these townships: myriad juxtapositions of actual circumstances with the unrealized plans of modernization.

### **RUINS OF AN UNREALIZED FUTURE: Rethinking the Temporality of Ruination**

In a landmark account of the modern experience, the political scientist [Marshall Berman \(2010, 21\)](#) remarks: "One of the distinctive virtues of modernism is that it leaves its questions echoing in the air long after the questioners

themselves, and their answers, have left the scene.” This article traces the echoes of a mid-twentieth-century resettlement project, focusing on the unrealized promises of plans for modernization as these frame a distinctive experience of ruination. Influenced by the critical theory of Walter Benjamin, a recent interdisciplinary literature has focused on the socio-material ruination of achieved projects of modernization (e.g., [Dawdy 2010](#); [Edensor 2012](#); [Gordillo 2014](#); [Schwenkel 2013](#); [Stoler 2008](#)). Interest in processes of ruination has correspondingly focused on the capacity for material decomposition to expose the conceptual limitations of modernization, notably through processes that literally deconstruct ideas of ordered, Cartesian space and of linear progressive time. This essay, by contrast, traces ruination as the felt sense of decomposition and decay framed by the unfulfilled promise of a plan that only ever partially arrived but that resettlers continue to want. It explores the seemingly contradictory possibility of the ruination of buildings and infrastructures that were, at most, partially completed, and that in many cases were never constructed at all. This paradoxical ruination entails a palpable sense of the failure of modernization to arrive, associated with an unstable and unresolved relationship between the actuality of existing circumstances and the imagined futures that continue to be projected from the unrealized plan.

Focusing on the spatial and temporal dimensions of ruination, I highlight how the plan’s engendered promises of linear, progressive temporality and of ordered, Cartesian space are implicated in contemporary social practice (e.g., [Bear 2014](#); [Latour 1993](#); [Rabinow and Stavrianakis 2014](#)). Rather than write against the teleology of modern infrastructure ([Gupta 2015](#); [Harvey, forthcoming](#); [Howe et al. 2016](#)), I focus on the practical ways in which this temporal representation frames experiences of time as the negation of this teleological ideal. Likewise, I explore how spatial images of modernization are enlisted to actively presence the absence of buildings and infrastructures. Unlike the negative spaces of buildings that once existed and are now destroyed ([Buchli 2013](#); [Edensor 2012](#); [Gordillo 2014](#); [Navaro-Yashin 2009](#)), these ruins exist as the negative time and space made present by an ideal: of what might have existed, even might still, but which does and has not. These are not absences presented as the material remains of that which has gone ([Berdahl 1999](#); [Bille, Hastrup, and Soerensen 2010](#)), but as the remembered anticipation of a future.

The remainder of this essay is in three parts. The first takes a historical view to outline the specific visions of modernization that animated the Volta Resettlement Project, and the ways in which the project fell short of expectations and

stalled. The following three ethnographic sections examine, from different angles, the spatio-temporal experiences of ruination for those now living in the remains of the Volta Resettlement Project. The final ethnographic section examines these residents' individual and collective efforts to develop and improve the settlement, and the interweaving of hope and despair produced by the desire to bring a lost future to fruition. These dynamics are associated with specific spatial and temporal logics and, as I suggest in the conclusion, enable a broader critical reframing of the concept of ruination. I argue that much of the existing literature is framed by a critical orientation to modernization and modernity, more generally, that elides what is ethnographically at stake in forms of ruination configured through an orientation to these as unrealized but desired conditions.

### **PLANNING MODERNIZATION: The Inception and Failure of the Volta Resettlement Project**

Sidestepping normatively inflected critiques (e.g., [Holston 1989](#); [Scott 1998](#)), I approach modernization in this article as an ethnographic category and concern ([Dick 2010](#); [Ferguson 1999](#); [Rabinow 1989](#)) central to a range of discourses, practical interactions, and ways of seeing. In Ghana, these ideas emerged in the 1960s as rationalist development and planning ideology, synonymous with the desire for rapid social and economic progress through linked changes in infrastructure, industry, society and economy, and hence through a break with tradition ([Meyer 1998](#)). In the contemporary “afterlife” ([Benjamin 1999](#), 460) of the project, as I will show, these ideas remain implicated in social practice as identity, process, event, and spatial category, sometimes elided with and at other times distinguished from more general understandings of modernity as the condition, identity, and experience of being modern. Thus I approach modernization as a specific “ideology of aspiration” ([Karlström 2004](#), 597) that intersects in contemporary discourses with ideas of development, progress, and improvement.

The Volta Resettlement Project was undertaken in the wake of the construction of the Akosombo Dam during the 1960s. Although plans for the dam were initiated in the colonial period, the project finally commenced following Ghana's independence in 1957 ([Hart 1980](#); [Moxon 1969](#); [Shapiro 2003](#)). As a flagship policy of Kwame Nkrumah, the leader of the Ghanaian independence movement and then Ghana's first president, the physical construction of the dam became materially and symbolically central to the construction of the newly independent nation (cf. [Mitchell 2002](#)). Because Ghana was Africa's first country to gain independence from British colonial rule, the project took on particularly

exemplary importance, both internationally and in Ghana, as a model for post-colonial development.

A newspaper editorial published in the *Ghanaian Times* (1963), a conduit of government propaganda, gives a sense of the significance of the project as a testament to a broader commitment to modernization:

Step by step, as the heroes of the Nkrumahist labor, stone by stone, put the Volta River Project into shape, another giant Nkrumah monument is rising to the glory and foresight of the revolutionary emancipator and the determination of the great party he founded to lead the people of Ghana to the socialist paradise. Work and happiness for all takes a million steps forward with the good news of the progress at Akosombo.

The project directly indexed the personal agency of Nkrumah and literalized his vision of a modernist pan-Africanist future, entailing a teleology of progress that sought to combine rapid modernization with the retention of existing traditions. In government propaganda, the dam's capacity to generate plentiful supplies of electrical power was often metaphorically conflated with the growing power of the nation (Shapiro 2003). Temporally it was constructed in public discourse as facilitating a movement from tradition to modernity, laying the economic foundations on which the nation was to be constructed. While the project depended heavily on international financial support and the technical, planning, and scientific input of international development agencies and staff, this was routinely elided in state narratives of the project as a symbol of national independence and emancipation.

At the vanguard of these nationalist aspirations, the eighty thousand resettlers held an ambiguous position in the national consciousness. Following completion of the dam in 1966, an editorial in the state-owned *Ghanaian Times* (1966) praised their selflessness: "Not least in the pride of place of honor and praise are those Ghanaians whose love for the motherland and the prosperity of mother Africa sacrificed their lot to bring the project to fruition. History will not forget them." While resettlement was celebrated in public discourses as a sacrifice for the broader good of national development, it was itself associated with progress (Miescher 2012). In a widely reported quote, frequently cited by inhabitants of the resettlement communities today, Nkrumah made a personal pledge that none of the resettled communities would be worse off as a consequence of the move.

The Volta Resettlement Project entailed a package of linked infrastructural changes imagined to set in motion progress to a different and better future via a



Figure 2. The Volta River Project and Nkrumah's modernist vision. Reproduced from the *Evening News*, 1966. In this piece of government propaganda, the project is one of the literal fruits of a process of modernization, represented here as a form of growth involving the interlinking of improvements in infrastructure, economy, society, and planning.

break with the traditional pasts (cf. Meyer 1998) of displaced populations, mostly rural subsistence farmers and migrant fisher folk. Key elements of this modernizing approach were the promotion of social and economic development through the creation of planned urban spaces and the technological improvement of agriculture and industrialization, notably linked to the power produced by the dam. Strongly inflected by Nkrumah's pan-Africanism, this ideology drew explicit inspiration from other socialist contexts, specifically in its presumption that planned urban infrastructure would generate a transformative modernity (Alexander and Buchli 2007; Holston 1989). Explicitly conceived as model townships, the resettlement communities represented an ideal of planned urban life. By bringing together previously distinct villages, planners aimed for a more efficient use of



resources in accordance with the tenets of central place theory, an internationally fashionable planning discourse of the time (Shapiro 2003). Under the Volta Basin Area Development Plan, hundreds of small subsistence villages were aggregated into fifty-four townships. As well as enabling the centralization of services, the agglomeration of previously distinct communities was intended to provide a compact labor force that would facilitate the mechanization of agricultural production and provide a further impetus to economic growth (Diaw and Schmidt-Kallert 1990). Resettlement townships were conceptualized as functionally integrated units in which social, ethnic, and economic differences were subsumed under a regional and national logic of development. As in a range of other African contexts (Bonneuil 2000; Mitchell 2002; D. Scott 2004), the midcentury discourses of planners and politicians constituted a set of aspirations concretely embedded in infrastructures intended to literalize a new relationship between citizens and the state, and that carried forward a set of hopes and expectations about the possibility of a different and better future.

From the outset, planners sought to make the future knowable and controllable through visions that existed in an unresolved and disjunctive relation to the material and social conditions they sought to change. While government discourses foregrounded the capacity to shape nature to human ends, the realization of this capacity required the coordination of a vast and complex range of people, processes, materials, and places that often evaded planners' efforts at control (cf. Mitchell 2002). Planners' letters and reports describe how buildings cracked, materials were stolen, cement caked, local workers failed to turn up and produced shoddy work, and resettlers retained traditions understood to be contrary to the logic of the modernist plan. Even by 1965, the aim of providing a modern home for all had given way to the provision of materials for resettlers to complete the housing themselves. Failure emerged in various public and planning discourses as a sense of disjuncture between promise and reality, which widened as the project unfolded.

Following a military coup in 1966 in which Nkrumah was deposed, as well as international shifts in donor-driven development priorities, there was little political support for a scheme that seemed to embody the more general failures of a corrupt and bloated state and a now unfashionably top-down approach (Diaw and Schmidt-Kallert 1990; Hart 1980; Obusu-Mensah 1996). Project staff, including town managers, extension workers, and welfare officers were laid off, compensation claims were often left unsettled, and support to complete resettlement houses was largely withdrawn. In many cases, residents who lacked funds



and sought opportunity elsewhere abandoned houses before they were completed. Urban aspirations were confounded by net outward migration, as a lack of economic opportunity led people, particular young men without land, to move to larger towns (Diaw and Schmidt-Kallert 1990). Migrant fisher folk resettled from seasonally occupied villages inundated by the lake returned to home towns on the coast (Lawson 1958). Ambitious plans for commercial, mechanized agriculture were abandoned, often before they began, as the new, politically conservative National Patriotic Party government reallocated land as small plots for traditional subsistence farming. Irrigation plans were abandoned before work started on grounds of feasibility and cost (Hart 1980). Public buildings including schools and clinics often remained unstarted or partly completed (Diaw and Schmidt-Kallert 1990).

From the 1980s onward, the World Bank Structural Adjustment policy further exacerbated state retrenchment throughout Ghana, imposing a series of measures to shrink the state and expand the market, including through privatization, deregulation, and the redirection of government aid to so-called third-sector organizations (Brydon and Legge 1996). These measures were associated with further withdrawal of the state from resettlement communities (Tsikata 2006). While free electricity was a key promise of the Nkrumah plan, most resettlement communities were not connected until the 1990s as part of a rural electrification project. High electricity prices meant that uptake was limited. Inhabitants of these townships have continued to rely on kerosene and wood as the main energy sources for cooking and light. Pipe-borne water, another key promise, remains largely absent. Today, the situation in townships is mixed: a general atrophying of state institutions and infrastructure complexly intersects with a range of more specific factors, including proximity to transportation and larger towns, distinct livelihood strategies, differential support from external agencies, and varying forms of ethnic tension. Notwithstanding resulting differences in demographic, economic, social, and infrastructural circumstance, a broad contrast remains central and salient across the fifty-four resettlement townships: between the promise of modernization set out in the plan and a set of circumstances that, in Kofi Diaw and Einhardt Schmidt-Kallert's (1990, 55) blunt if simplistic assessment, "share the common plight of farmers in remote places all over Africa." In this context, the architectural and infrastructural remains of the project exist in an unrealized or partially completed form, as "unintentional monuments" (Riegl 1982, 23) to the memory of past plans. The following three sections trace how memories of the plan simultaneously arise from and dramatize these contemporary circum-

stances. They focus, respectively, on memories of the promise of Nkrumah's time; on the contrasting perspectives of modernity offered by contemporary city life and by the imagined utopia of the settlement as it might have been; and on ambivalent recollections and imaginations of a traditional pre-resettlement past.

### **REMEMBERING THE FUTURE: Nkrumah's Time and the Nostalgia for Modernization**

Almost fifty years after the inception of the project, I speak with Alex, an elderly man resettled to the town of Npakadan in the 1960s, as he shows me his home, a so-called core house given to him at the time of resettlement as compensation for property lost in the move. These prefabricated structures took three main forms, each providing a small nucleus along with foundations and overhanging roofs intended to facilitate the future development of further rooms, as prefigured by the plans (Danby 1970). The provision of partly finished buildings thus anticipated the whole, not only of a completed modern building but also of a fully modern future (Shapiro 2003). As we were talking, the vision of his wife cooking on a charcoal fire at the threshold of the house brings to mind the memory of a promised future:

They had to give us a kitchen. That was the plan in Nkrumah's time. They said they would put up kitchen, bathroom, toilet for every house. But this was not done. So this structure, this toilet, I put it here myself. The kitchen too, I put it there myself. Bathroom too, myself.

Structural voids that once anticipated the end point of a modernizing process now literalize its failure. Alex's own modest additions index an absence of promised support and the failure of modernization to arrive.

Later, as Alex escorts me on a tour of the town, we pause for a moment to take in the scene: an unpaved road fringed by houses, mostly unfinished and in poor repair, some completely abandoned. He explains that in the absence of well-paid jobs, many people have moved elsewhere. Today the place is occupied by only a thousand or so residents, and can be walked across in a matter of minutes. Agricultural produce, including yams, cassava, and tomatoes, are stacked and stored in rooms that planners intended for expansion as kitchens, bathrooms, and bedrooms. In places people have constructed makeshift boundary fences, but for the most part the delineated space of the plan, never realized as envisaged, remains only as the memory of a promise. As he takes in the scene, Alex reflects



Figure 3. Resettlement core house abandoned before completion. Photo by Thomas Yarrow.

with obvious pathos on what might have been if history had taken a different path:

Life would have been really good—happier. Today we would have had an aerodrome, and Nkrumah also thought of making some rail lines from Kpong—many, many good things. The minute Nkrumah died all his plans and all that he wanted to do for the resettlement was stopped. . . . So that is why we are suffering. Other than that, this town would be a very nice town.

Alex's invocation of the plan is situated through a specific history of resettlement and his own personal circumstances: located away from the main road, economic opportunity has been limited, outmigration is correspondingly high, and building completion rates are low; a witness to when resettlement took place, he remains keenly aware of what was lost.

Beyond these specificities, his narrative exemplifies an “infrastructural imaginary” (Nielsen and Pedersen 2015) more widely pervasive in resettled communities. Through a range of everyday encounters, existing circumstances are imaginatively juxtaposed with images of the promised possibilities of modernization.

Partially completed or entirely absent, infrastructures do not prompt the recollection of actual people and events (cf. Crang and Travlou 2001; Edensor 2012; Stewart 1996), but instead of a set of unrealized possibilities and promises. Plans for modernization are both the retrospective memory of a promised future and the prospective anticipation of what still might be.

The incomplete or never begun elements of the plan exist as ruins of the future, in the sense that decay and decomposition are experienced relative to an image of what the townships could have been. Through explicit discourses and as a less articulated “visual aesthetic of progress” (D. Scott 2004, 254), the plan is made imaginatively present, offering visions of social, economic, and infrastructural completion that constitute the sense of failure and deficiency. These present absences are encountered through myriad everyday interactions: abandoned houses are understood to index a failure of modernization, evidence of a town that has failed to develop; incomplete structures are apprehended as unrealized versions of the modern homes they might have been; bodies are spoken of as withered versions of the healthy bodies that could have resulted from a more prosperous way of life.

Understandings of infrastructural ruination and material decay have their counterpart in temporal orientations that emerge as negations of linear progress and development. Born in Awura Hae, a small village resettled to New Senchi, Nana (“chief”) moved to Accra to work as a security guard before returning. Now in his sixties, he lives in a small core house, adapted for the purposes of his current role as a locally respected but relatively powerless village subchief. In contrast to neighboring houses, the plot is demarcated by a picket fence. By the gate is a shrine, a conical cement structure with protruding, empty beer bottles. Nana refers to the house as a palace (*ahemfi*), a term that conveys its distinctive nature as a locus of chiefly authority and a space of secrecy (McCaskie 1995). The term is also associated with a level of grandeur that highlights through stark contrast the small, decaying nature of the building. Bemoaning the inadequacies of his palace for the purposes of an office, Nana connects his impoverished status to the wider problems of the resettlement townships: “If we were to be during Nkrumah’s time, by this time here would be very different. . . . We don’t get anything after Nkrumah’s time.” Imagining a set of circumstances in which Nkrumah had not been overthrown, he described an alternative developmental trajectory: “If it was Nkrumah [still in power], you would find it difficult to enter my palace. You see, I will be growing tall and fine. But now, see, I am poor in everything.” As he speaks, he gestures to himself, as if to highlight his own

embodiment of a wider state of poverty: he is wearing a T-shirt that has holes and is heavily worn. Though withered with age, his arms have a sinewy musculature, the corporeal embodiment of his ongoing dependence on farming.

The utopian terms in which the modernizing aspirations of the project are routinely recalled resonate with contemporary national discourses in which Nkrumah emerges as a focus of collective nostalgia, arising from disenchantment with the corruption of subsequent governments (Hasty 2005) and a pervasive sense of postcolonial developmental failure (Nugent 1996). As in Katie Kilroy-Marac's (2013, 11) account of Senegalese memories of Senghor, nostalgia works retrospectively and prospectively, "looping back" to a hope that directs itself to a present "that was lost before it ever came into being." Inhabiting the infrastructural remains of a project that once situated them at the vanguard of national development, resettlers experience the linked senses of developmental failure and high-modern nostalgia in particularly acute terms. Imagining an alternative trajectory in which development occurred according to the modernizing ideals personified by Nkrumah, existing social and infrastructural realities are understood in relation to a parallel present projected from the expectations of the plan: how life would or might have been had the planned modernization occurred.

Recent commentators describe how nostalgia arises as a positive desire for traditional pasts, projected from disenchantment with modern progressive time and experiences of rapid change (e.g., Berman 2010; Boym 2001). As an inversion of this logic, nostalgic yearnings for the modernizing visions of Nkrumah arise as a reflex of the sense of its absence: in Daphne Berdahl's (1999) terms, a fluid and open *once was* arises from and dramatizes the sense of a static *now*. Experiences of unwanted temporal stasis emerge as the presenced absence of the linear, progressive temporality of modernization. Frustrations at a lack of development prompt nostalgic recollections of modernization and the desire to return to a time in which the future seemed open, hopeful, and full of promise (cf. Boyer 2006).

### MODERNITY ELSEWHERE: The City and the Utopia

Planned visions of modernization are situated alongside contemporary images of modernity to compound this experience of stasis. Rose moved to Senchi to live with her husband, whose parents were resettled to the township in the 1960s. With two young children, they rent a partly completed house. Electrical wires remain exposed, blockwork unplastered, and windows unfitted. She cooks on a solid fuel stove in the shell of a room intended at some point to house, in her own terms, a "modern kitchen." Unsure when, if ever, these plans will be

realized, she describes this condition as “permanently temporary” and connects her domestic situation to problems in the town more generally:

When we Ghanaians go abroad we like it! But here there are no jobs. There is no money. My husband wanted to work at ATL [a large local textiles factory]. He has applied, applied, applied, but he doesn't get work. So he is thinking about getting a job, getting money. Everyone in this town has plans that they want to get money, want to build a house, want to buy a car. But the money is not there.

In a context in which rural-urban migration is common, understandings of life in the capital city constitute another powerful referent to a spatially dislocated modernity (Manuh 2003). Peter, now in his early thirties, spent some time working in Accra as a mechanic, but was forced to return to his family home in the resettlement township of Senchi following the loss of this job:

The abroad of Ghana is Accra. Everything can be found over there. So we the youth prefer living in Accra than here. But you see, if you want to go to Accra, like me here, you have to sit down and analyze the issues—who am I going to stay with? Where am I going to sleep? What am I going to eat? Because of lack of those things, that's why we are here. But if the opportunity is created for you to go to Accra, then it's good. Because those places, you can make life. Those places, you can make a living. So it isn't our desire, we are not so happy to be here.

Whether or not people actually migrate, understandings of modernity *there* inflect understandings of its absence *here*, so that, as Hilary Parsons Dick (2010, 276) describes in the context of transnational Mexican migration, “present life [is refracted] through the prism of possible lives inhabitable somewhere else.”

Images of contemporary modernity, and of the past futures of high-modern planners, share a temporal logic of progress that allows for elision and slippage between these (Dick 2010; Koselleck 2004). While both are drawn into experiences of these spaces as deficient, they entail distinct imaginative possibilities. Images of contemporary modernity locate the temporal opposition between modern and nonmodern in various spatial contrasts, so that the presence of modernity *there* makes evident its absence *here*. Conversely, the past futures of modernization (see Koselleck 2004) are experienced as spatially contiguous but temporally dislocated: modernization promised *then* presences its absence *now*.

Whether or not people have experienced city life themselves, narratives of urban life celebrate economic possibility, excitement, and civilization alongside a more ambivalent understanding of cities as places that are morally corrupting, lack the support of kin, and in which economic possibilities remain heavily constrained. In contrast, existing only as aspiration and promise, Nkrumahist visions of modernization carry a heightened sense of imaginative possibility, verging on the utopian, relating to their lack of a tangible referent (cf. Boyer 2006; Koselleck 2004, 264). Younger residents share in a positive evaluation of this ideal, even as they lament the older generation's continued preoccupation with it. The latter are "living in the past," as the young often remark, and so are unable to imagine futures of more viable kinds.

### **AFTER TRADITION, BEFORE MODERNITY: Recalling the Pre-resettlement Past**

Brian Larkin (2004, 305) highlights how, in Nigeria, senses of temporal stasis are constituted through routine interactions with poorly functioning infrastructures, so that "even as life speeds up, the experience of technological marginalisation intensifies, and the gap between how fast society is moving and how fast it could move becomes a site of considerable political tension." In resettlement townships, partly realized, crumbling, or nonexistent infrastructures are encountered alongside precariously functioning and failing technologies of more recent origin, engendering a similar sense of falling behind. Linked ideas about development and modernization inflect experiences of time as a negation of these: a pervasive sense of temporal stasis and regression arises in this gap between the ideal and the actual. Temporally speaking, ruination emerges as the felt sense of anachronism—not as the presence of the past in the present (Lucas 2015) but as a present out of kilter with itself: of buildings, infrastructures, and circumstances that appear *behind* where they should have been had expectations materialized.

The absent, partly realized, and decaying infrastructures of resettlement are seen as indicative of unrealized modernization, but they also prompt ambivalent reflections on the more traditional ways of life that prevailed prior to the move. Now living in the resettlement town of Senchi, EK (the initials by which he is locally known), a young adult when the move took place, reflects on the changes resettlement has brought:

By that time there were no lorries. There were no communication facilities. There was no development. No post office. No proper road. And farming



was with crude implements. We would just weed—weed, weed, weed. There were no tractors: nothing there!

Ideas about actual or promised modernization are implicated in negative characterizations of pre-resettlement life as undeveloped, but they also inform a more positive orientation to this period. EK exemplifies a wider ambivalence: “Before, we had fishing and trapping and hunting. But here things were not like that. Where are you going to weed?” he asks rhetorically, highlighting the lack of farmland. “Where are you going to get grasscutter [a large rodent referred to outside Ghana as the greater cane rat]?” he implores, recalling a time when bush meat was freely available. For EK, the failures of the plan are compounded by the diminishment of a more traditional way of life. Ruptured from the promised futures of modernization, he also feels ruptured from a past that is positively associated with greater freedom and traditional customs now lost. While things in the present are understood relative to things as they might have been had modernization occurred, contemporary problems are also experienced relative to the possibilities of things as they were in the pre-resettlement past.

Younger people share in these narratives of ruin, but they are often more willing to see the benefits of the move. Born shortly after resettlement, Emmanuel lives in Accra, earning a good wage as a policeman, but he regularly returns to the resettlement township of Apeguso, where he owns a house and continues to provide material support for relatives. He considers Apeguso his hometown. Though he laments the failure to deliver on Nkrumah’s vision, he is sanguine about the changes resettlement entailed:

In those days the school was far from the villages and the children had to walk about a mile or two before they got to school. But now we have resettled, schools are around us. So those are the benefits we have actually got. Because if we were staying at the old place, I would not have been able to become a policeman. I would have been a farmer or a fisherman. But because we were brought here, everyone’s children now go to school. Education is the key to what we have now. So in fact we the youth, we the children, we have benefited.

He acknowledges the relative poverty of his parents and the personal benefits of resettlement, even as he also laments the unrealized promises of the plan.

Differences in access to farmland, paid employment, and the ability to leverage funds from urban relatives relate to differential abilities to modify, improve,

and modernize these houses. Through contemporary interactions, “the plan” is projected as a series of imaginative possibilities that arise through the interplay of specific resettlement infrastructures and the myriad circumstances of people now occupying them. Distinct understandings of ruination arise as specific articulations of disjuncture: between existing material and social conditions and visions of the project’s modernizing promise.

In a recent discussion of the temporality of infrastructure, [Akhil Gupta \(2015\)](#) suggests that “suspension . . . instead of being a temporary phase between the start of a project and its (successful) conclusion, needs to be theorized as its own condition of being. The temporality of suspension is not between past and future, between beginning and end, but constitutes its own ontic condition just as surely as does completion.” In the wake of resettlement, midcentury plans prove integral to an experience of ruination that engenders a particular temporal orientation: suspension is a permanent ontological state variously experienced and configured as a relation between the promises of a still unrealized plan and contemporary material and social conditions. Where the developmental timeline is “cracked apart” ([Ferguson 2006](#), 186) into its constituent parts, stasis constitutes the status of being in between a tradition that has been lost and a modernization that has yet to arrive.

The preceding three sections have examined the varieties of experiences of ruination and lost promise. In the next and final ethnographic section, I focus on residents’ active attempts to remedy this situation and the paradoxical interweaving of hope and despair entailed in these efforts.

### **BUILDING THE TOWN: Hope, Despair, and Collective Effort**

How is the future made in the wake of these collapsed promises? Visions of modernization are reanimated in the present in diverse diagnoses of the problems and possibilities of resettlement townships. Widely held ideas about the unfulfilled promises of the plan frame different understandings of who is to blame for its failure and what is to be done as a consequence. Wisdom, a primary school teacher in his early thirties, lives in the resettlement town of Apeguso, in the core house he inherited from his parents, migrant fisher folk. In a narrative common to his generation, he describes how the problems of the town stem from the actions of the older generation:

You see people who were here and then left for greener pastures. Most of them have forgotten this place. Those who have built their homes and settled

there, they don't care about this place any longer. If they were to have that thinking, "I came from there and there are still people living there, so the development of the place is my priority," then they can come in, organize themselves, and contribute.

Many of those resettled to Apeguso were Ewe fisher folk with hometowns in the southeast of Ghana, to which they returned. The township is attached to a previously existing village of Twi-speaking Akans, resulting in ethnic difference that is widely understood as a source of discrimination and tension (Yarrow 2011). Wisdom tells me of his own decision to stay and of the need to learn the lessons of these failures:

It is very important to study the past and compare it to the present so that you see where you have fallen short and correct them for development. If you don't think of the past, you will never progress. It is not just a matter of studying the past and leaving it, you also have to compare it to the future. Then you look at the measures to take so that you see that the future will be very bright.

Hopeful developmental futures continue to be projected from the plan, even in light of discourses that highlight persistent and long-term failure (cf. Miyazaki 2004). While post-Nkrumah governments have largely sought to abrogate responsibility for these townships (Diaw and Schmidt-Kallert 1990), resettlers continue to make claims on the basis of this history. Efforts to enlist support from NGOs and government agencies take shape through discourses that presence the history of resettlement and the broken promises of the plan. Organizations have been set up to advocate for the rights of resettlement communities. Calls for sanitation, water, and repairs to houses are voiced in discourses that recall the sacrifices of resettlers and Nkrumah's claims that nobody would be worse off as a result of the move.

The felt absence of modernization inspires calls for help and is also connected to a range of personal and collective efforts to improve circumstances within these townships. Inhabitants of resettlement townships echo narratives common in other parts of southern Ghana (van der Geest 1998; Yarrow 2011), which connect the act of building or improving a house with a range of positive virtues. People build to provide a legacy for their children and attach importance to houses as a literalization of a commitment to hometowns, grounded in kin ties. In resettlement townships, the moral imperative to build is explicitly configured as an effort to

contribute to the collective development of the town. Now in his seventies, EK lives in the resettlement township of Senchi. After the move, the house his family was given proved too small, and many of the children scattered to other parts of Ghana. Recently, he returned and, through money earned as a cocoa farmer, was able to expand the core house given to him by the government as compensation for possessions and land he lost in the move. He described his own building project as part of a trajectory of the town's development through the successive acts of future generations:

When you are in your town and there is no job, you travel to go and acquire money to come back to develop. So when your children, when they also go, they too acquire land and build. Then the town will be large.

Economic migration is not only understood in terms of personal advancement but also as a source of wealth through which the whole town benefits (van der Geest 1998). James spent time working in Somanya, the district capital of Krobo, but recently returned to his hometown of Senchi, where his parents were resettled. Drawing a contrast to life in Somanya, he describes the “backwardness” of Senchi, highlighting the lack of paved roads and absence of street lighting. Correspondingly, he explains his intention to build there as a contribution to development:

The place is not good, but some people are building their house here, making development. . . . I didn't build in Somanya because I want my hometown to grow. I could build there but I want here to develop.

Personal acts of building are imagined as part of a broader process of development and progress that is celebrated as a contribution to the realization of a more modern form of life. Through hometown associations, money and resources are donated by urban-based migrants to assist with community-development projects, including the construction of schools, borehole wells, and efforts to generate local employment.

As a series of interlinked images, midcentury plans intersect with images of urban life in the capital and the West, eliciting efforts to improve and providing benchmarks against which the adequacy or inadequacy of their own developmental actions are assessed. Lacking electricity, illegal connections are often established. Without money to extend houses in the concrete blocks and corrugated iron that are widely desired, the houses are built using mud construction techniques (locally termed *swish*) and thatch. In the absence of money to renovate a decaying infra-

structural fabric, houses are patched up, using whatever materials are available. These improvised alterations may in practice last long periods of time, but they are explicitly understood as temporary. While residents of townships seek to accommodate themselves to present circumstances as best they can, they remain keenly aware of their failure to bring about the futures they desire. In this context, where the plan is manifestly unrealized and the state almost totally absent, deviations from the spatial regularities of the plan are not, in [Michel de Certeau's \(1984\)](#) influential framing, tactics of resistance. Quite the opposite: they stem from an internalized desire for order, discipline, and regularity whose perceived lack leads to lamentation and despair. Ideas of accommodation, locally connoted through such terms as *making do* and *managing* emerge as a recognition of the limitations of resettlers' efforts, a recognition inflected by midcentury infrastructural imaginations of different, better futures. Imagined images of planned modernization animate a negative experience of time and space that is associated with efforts to redress this lack through development, but they also prompt a more fatalistic orientation to living with things as they are.

In resettlement communities, narratives of failure and despair are specified forms of negativity relative to visions of modernization that are sources of hope: in the possibility and anticipation of moving on or catching up, even in the knowledge of previous failure to do so (cf. [Miyazaki 2004](#)). Other analysts have theorized ruins as sites of hope, engendering logics alternative to the hubris of those seduced by modern self-representations of time and space (e.g., [Dawdy 2010](#)). In post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan, [Mathijs Pelkmans \(2013\)](#) foregrounds the imaginatively productive dimensions of ruins as literally empty spaces that open up sites for the imagination of open futures, and hence for collective hope. [Shannon Lee Dawdy \(2010, 777\)](#) suggests that "there is hope in ruins, in the suggestion that modernity can be surpassed." Situated temporally and conceptually after the fact of modernity, ruins draw their socially and imaginatively productive force from their subversive orientation to this condition. By contrast, the Volta Resettlement Project shows how hope can be directed toward the possibility of modernization in ways that are also powerfully associated with despair over a gap between the present and a future that appears out of reach.

### CONCLUSION: Rethinking Ruination

In a recent article, Cymene Howe and colleagues propose an important distinction between "infrastructure that has gone to ruin and infrastructure that never was" ([Howe et al. 2016, 4](#)). While a considerable literature has focused on

the former, accounts of the latter remain scant. In this essay, I have sought to trace the distinctive form of ruination that emerges not as the absence of something once present (Buchli 2013; Edensor 2012), but as a sense of decay, fragmentation, and degradation seen through the lens of a promised future. In his landmark account, Reinhart Koselleck (2004) traces the emergence of a conception of irreversible, directional time to eighteenth-century Europe. He proposes that such a conception “appears to unchain a yearned-for future . . . [that] robs the present of materiality and actuality” (Koselleck 2004, 23). I have sought to outline forms of immateriality and absence that are likewise configured in relation to a future yearning for completion. Here, however, it is not that a shifting present is outpaced by a moving horizon of expectation. Rather, absence is rendered material and actual precisely in its incommensurability with a planned future that never arrives. How might these enable a critical reframing of the concept of ruination?

Building more or less directly on the critical theory of Walter Benjamin (1999), the recent interdisciplinary “turn toward ruins” (Dawdy 2010, 762) constitutes a critique of the Romantic reification of ruins as sites of aesthetic contemplation and illumination (Buchli 2013). Even as this turn directs attention to ruins of more recent origin, a broadly Romantic sensibility remains pervasive: a conceptual antipathy to modern ordering and disciplining and the correlative celebration of logics that elude, complicate, and question modern and modernist progressivism (Buchli 2013; Pelkmans 2013). Building on Benjamin’s (1999) *Arcades Project*, much of this recent work starts from the given fact of the spectacle of modernity and looks to ruins, highlighting what is illusory and so concealed in this condition. In Gastón Gordillo’s (2014, 6) terms, rubble reveals “the critical power of negativity to disintegrate the positivity of the given, of things as they seem to be, and thereby to undermine any reified fantasy of a complete seamless whole.” Ruins undermine the “self-deception” (Dawdy 2010, 763) of modern representations of time as linear and progressive. Likewise, material decomposition reveals the conceptual limitations of Cartesian understandings of planned space, and of a Western metaphysics of presence (Derrida 1976). Tim Edensor (2012, 844) suggests that ruins, highlight how “modern attempts to cleanse, banish ambiguity and order the memory of space are always disturbed by such disorderly spaces and by the ghosts they contain.”

Much of the recent work on ruination therefore has a critically deconstructive orientation, aiming to highlight the manifest but illusory sense of modern self-representations of time and space. Yet after the fact of the purified self-

representations that are the signature of modernity (see [Latour 1993](#)), this deconstructive orientation eclipses the logic of others' practices wherever these are oriented toward a felt sense of the lack of modernity and a positive hope for its presence.

The Volta Resettlement Project foregrounds a set of spatial and temporal dynamics that have received little attention in existing work on ruination and, accordingly, enable a critical reframing of the scholarship to date. Where, to paraphrase [Gordillo \(2014, 6\)](#), the positivity of the given is manifestly not a given, modern representations of time and space exist as self-evidently unrealized ideals, which configure a series of negations. In these circumstances, it is not that ruination exposes the hubris of linear time, but that hope in the possibility of progress frames a pervasive sense of stasis and regression (cf. [Ferguson 2006](#); [Geissler 2011](#); [Larkin 2004](#)). Crumbling infrastructures do not elicit the memory of people and places that once existed and have now gone ([Edensor 2012](#); [Gordillo 2014](#); [Navaro-Yashin 2009](#); [Schwenkel 2013](#)). They presence, instead, the promise of what might have been. Unrealized plans are associated with a bifurcated experience of time, in which the present is shadowed by images of things as they might have been had modernization occurred. Nostalgia does not take the form of the longing for a static traditional past in contrast to a progressive present ([Boym 2001](#)), but of the melancholic recollection of an earlier, progressive promise in conditions of apparent temporal stasis. Ruination in these conditions involves a series of temporal negations that are linked to a distinctive experience of space. In the remains of resettlement, ruination is not a process by which the manifestly whole forms of an earlier modernity are decomposed, exposed, and surpassed; it emerges, instead, as a pervasive and self-evident sense of the fragmentary nature of built environments and lives, when seen through the lens of promised plans.

## ABSTRACT

*Focusing on a planned scheme of resettlement undertaken in Ghana in the wake of independence in 1957, this essay explores how midcentury plans for modernization exist in disjunctive relation to unrealized material infrastructures. Drawing on ethnographic research in resettlement townships, the account describes the contemporary afterlives of the plan, tracing how its promised futures shadow present understandings of contemporary and future life. The essay examines the distinctive form that ruination takes not as once-functional, now-decaying infrastructure, but as the ongoing effects of an unrealized plan. Here, experiences of ruination are associated with a set of spatial and temporal dynamics that emerge as the felt negation of linear time and Cartesian space. Insofar as the recent scholarly turn to ruins assumes the existence of*



*modernization, it in fact eclipses what is conceptually at stake in situations where modernization exists only as a promise. [modernization; resettlement; ruination; development; Ghana]*

## NOTES

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1. The article builds on two periods of ethnographic research, totaling four months undertaken in 2007 and 2008. Participant-observation and semistructured interviews focused mainly on the resettlement townships of Apeguso, Senchi, and Npakadan, all located toward the south of Lake Akosombo but with contrasting ethnic compositions and resettlement histories. To trace the historical development of the resettlement plan, archival research was undertaken at the Volta River Authority archives in Tema.

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